**Ready For Liftoff** - management  
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In the early 1990s, ASCA member Laura Owen was a freshly minted school counselor, eager to begin her full-time job at Provo High School in Provo, Utah. She had recently finished her graduate program in school counseling, where she had taken classes on career guidance, academic advisement and mental health. She was equipped with the knowledge and strategies to help students succeed at school and beyond.

Then Owen attended a conference led by school counseling guru Norman Gysbers. Participants learned a new way of thinking about school counseling: the comprehensive guidance program. The training outlined an entirely new role for counselors, one that would take them out of their offices and put them in the classroom. Gysbers urged school counselors to become active partners with teachers and administrators and work together toward implementing standards that would address the academic, career and personal/social development of each student.

For Owen, the training was an “ah-ha” moment. She immediately saw how the comprehensive approach would allow her to use her training to deliver services in an organized way and even measure the impact on students. Owen was hooked.

More than a decade later, Owen is still a passionate believer in the power of comprehensive school counseling, the basis for the ASCA National Model® released in 2003. She introduced the ASCA National Model first at Provo High School and later at Cibola High School in Albuquerque. Cibola High School went on to receive the Recognized ASCA Model Program (RAMP) award in May 2005. Currently, Owen is manager of counseling services, a position that allows to her infuse the ASCA National Model throughout the Albuquerque Public School System. She describes the ASCA National Model as a win-win for everybody.

**Developing a Management System**   
Developing a management system is the second step of the four-step process to implement the ASCA National Model. During the ASCA National Model’s initial foundation stage, school counselors design the program’s beliefs, vision and curriculum content – the “what” of their comprehensive counseling program. The management system builds upon that foundation and answers other questions such as who? what? when? and why? After these important details are decided, the comprehensive school counseling program is almost ready for liftoff. Counselors must discuss address accountability and a delivery system, the remaining components of the ASCA National Model, before the launch takes place.

When putting together a management system, school counselors and administrators discuss how counselors will do their jobs and what type of support is needed. Julia Taylor, a high school counselor at Cary High School in North Carolina, said that, although the management system may take a while to develop, it’s a vital piece.” These discussions allow “everyone to get on same page and understand what everyone else is responsible for.”

The ASCA National Model offers five tools and approaches for developing a management system to ensure everyone is, indeed, on the same page: management agreements, advisory council, use of data, action plans, use of time and calendars.

**Management agreements:** The management agreement defines how the program is set up and who is responsible for each part. It addresses such issues as method for assigning students, counselor specialties, allocation of counselor time and professional development activities. Drafting the agreement increases dialogue between counselors and administrators and helps administrators understand the best ways to utilize their counseling staff.

The process of drawing up the management agreement has a few basic steps: prepare a draft agreement, sit down with the administrator to discuss, make modifications as needed and have the administrator sign off on the agreement. When meeting with administrators, school counselors should be prepared to discuss what’s in the agreement, give the rationale and help administrators understand the benefits.

Not surprisingly, most school counselors do their homework before they approach their administrators with their initial draft.

At Sequoia Middle School in Fontana, Calif., head counselor Nancy Jarman-Dunn said school counselors survey students, staff and parents to get their input on students’ academic and behavior needs. From this feedback, counselors select about a dozen topics to focus on in the coming year. One year the superintendent requested that staff work to improve attendance rates; in response, school counselors crafted a plan that included guidance lessons with an emphasis on attendance.

Before developing their management agreement, Cibola High School counselors in Albuquerque, N.M., collected data for two years on how they spent their time. Counselors were able to use real data to say, “This is how we’re spending our time, and this is how we’d like to spend our time.” The counseling team used its time records to show which of its activities made a difference for students. As a result, administrators readily agreed to the proposed agreement with its new time allocations.

Many school counselors turn to the sample management agreement found in the appendix of the ASCA National Model to guide them. Jarman-Dunn added that some criteria must be adapted. For example, the idea of designating a counselor-of-the-day is not appropriate for a school with two counselors, as is the case for her 1,400-student school. Instead, Jarman-Dunn and her colleague coordinate their schedules so only of them is in the classroom, leaving the other available for breaking situations

Once a management agreement is in place, most revisit it annually at the beginning of the school year. This yearly review helps school counselors adapt to students’ changing needs, make improvements and shift toward a more comprehensive program over time.

Eric Sparks, director of school counseling for Wake County Public School System in North Carolina, urges counselors not to use the management agreement to change everything overnight. For the past two years, his department has been working with schools throughout his district to train and help staff implement the ASCA National Model. “Think about the management agreement in terms of a three-year plan. Tweak it each year to move closer toward your vision.” This slower approach also gives administrators time to observe, appreciate and eventually praise the benefits of a comprehensive guidance program.

**Advisory council:** The advisory council is another key component of a management system. In Albuquerque, Laura Owen calls the advisory council “the best tool in the ASCA National Model.” Counselors invite key stakeholders to sit on the advisory council, where they discuss the counseling program’s needs and accomplishments and give advice. Council members are typically parents, board members, teachers, students, administrators and community representatives.

In addition to being an important forum for discussion and feedback, the advisory council is invaluable for helping to spread the word about the comprehensive school counseling program. Once members understand the program and see the gains, they leave meetings and talk it up among their friends and colleagues. “They end up being the best PR system you can set up,” Owen said.

Sparks offers a few recommendations when setting up an advisory council:

• Make sure there is a diverse group of stakeholders so all perspectives are at the table.   
• Turn to council members for suggestions, contacts and resources that can help the school counseling program be more effective and efficient.   
• Remember that, although stakeholders can offer valuable feedback, ultimately counselors are responsible for building the program.

**Use of data:** Good data help to answer the bottom-line question facing all school personnel: Is what we’re doing useful to students? Thus, as part of devising a management system, counselors reach agreement with administrators about how to collect and use data to show the counseling program’s impact on students.

Typically school counselors look at a combination of qualitative and quantitative data relating to academic, behavior and attendance. Common data sets include student-achievement data (e.g., grade point averages, standardized test results and promotion rates) and achievement-related data (e.g., attendance rates, suspension rates and homework completion rates).

In addition, school counselors collect program evaluation data. For a suicide prevention curriculum, for example, they may gather process data (e.g., 600 eighth-grade students received suicide prevention school guidance lesson) and perception data (e.g., 90 percent of students can identify the five signs of suicide ideation).

Other data are focused on counselors and how they spend their time. Counselors report on the number of crisis situations they address and the amount of time they spend on classroom instruction, individual counseling, group work and noncounseling tasks.

School counselors find it useful to examine data broken out according to specific variables. By dissecting the data, they can track how the school counseling program affects students by gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status or other variables. Jarman-Dunn used disaggregate data to review the impact of a social skills group she ran for middle school students. Reviewing data broken down by gender, she saw that both boys and girls had a decrease in discipline referrals following the group. However, girls experienced an increase in their grade point averages, while boys experienced a slight decrease. The school counseling team used these findings to refocus its efforts.

Sometimes this need for data can discourage counselors and administrators from even considering the ASCA National Model. “If it isn’t broken, don’t fix it,” is still a philosophy of some school counselors and administrators. “The data lingo can scare some people away from the idea of implementing the ASCA National Model,” Taylor said. “However, the data are simply about showing how students are different as a result of the school counseling program. The number crunching is not difficult.”

In fact, schools tailor their data plans to match their capacity to collect and analyze data. Some school counselors capture data by using tally marks on sheets at their desks and totaling them each month to measure outcomes. Other school systems have separate evaluation departments that oversee data collection and analysis. As with all aspects of the ASCA National Model, this provision allows school counselors to do what makes sense for them in their schools and districts.

**Action plans:** Action plans chart the specifics of the comprehensive counseling program. There are two types: closing the gap action plan and guidance curriculum action plan.

As the name implies, the closing the gap action plan details how a school or district will address select gaps in student achievement and development. The closing the gap action plan outlines each guidance lesson, necessary materials, timetable, projected number of students, evaluation method and key personnel for the lesson. The plan also highlights the lesson’s intended effects on academics, behavior or attendance.

With guidance curriculum action plans, counselors provide a similar level of detail for each guidance lesson and also show how the lessons fit together to address the full range of students’ needs. As Jarman-Dunn said, “Teachers are required to have lessons plans. If I’m going to be considered professional by other faculty, I should draft them, too.” As school counselors receive feedback and refine their lesson plans, the guidance curriculum action plan is updated.

In the Wake County Public School System, the central office’s leadership team initiated a series of trainings to entice schools throughout the district to adopt the ASCA National Model and used action plans as the initial hook. Every school in the system is required to write three closing the gap action plans that target specific areas the data show needs improvement. After completing these plans and monitoring results, schools complete the first stage of the school system’s model recognition program and reach the one-quarter carat’ level.

Schools may then to choose to move on to subsequent levels. In the stages that follow, school counselors develop additional pieces of the ASCA National Model. Form an advisory council and conduct a program audit to reach one-half carat. Complete a foundation system and add additional action plans and earn a three-quarter carat. At the full carat level, the school has evaluated its program and fine-tuned its efforts in preparation to apply for a RAMP designation.

**Use of time:** A comprehensive counseling program only works if school counselors are able to spend their time on counseling-related activities as spelled out in the management agreement and action plans. The ASCA National Model provides guidance on how counselors should spend their time and gives target percentages for time to be spent on guidance curriculum, individual student planning, responsive services and system support (i.e., activities that are not direct services to students). These percentages are for the entire program, not necessarily counselor-specific, particularly as schools have varying needs and school counselors have different expertise.

The time allocation guidelines also differ between levels. For example, the range of time for elementary school counselors to spend in the classroom is 35 percent to 45 percent, while high school counselors may only spend 15 percent to 25 percent of their time in classrooms. Then again, most elementary school counselors allot only 5 percent to 10 percent of their time to individual student planning, while high school counselors spend 25 percent to 35 percent of their time on individual student planning as they help students plan for life after graduation.

Sparks calls the time guidelines one of the most helpful pieces of the ASCA National Model. The target percentages help counselors assess the amount of time spent on non-school-counseling activities and provide an opportunity to talk with administrators about adjusting their time allocation to better help students. For administrators, this can be a huge paradigm shift.

However, once administrators experience the benefits of letting counselors do what they are trained to do, they usually become strong advocates for the comprehensive school counseling program. Principals end up spending less time responding to crises, because, as Owen said, “Counselors are putting out fires before they ever start.”

**Calendars:** Finally, the ASCA National Model recommends school counselors produce master calendars of school counseling activities. Developing, publishing and distributing calendars helps to inform students, parents, teachers and administrators and better integrate counseling activities into the school’s overall education program.

Although counselors often develop master calendars, they still need a degree of flexibility. Jarman-Dunn described how her school’s spring calendar featured a unit on bullying with students using interactive CDs in the computer lab. Despite school counselors booking the computer lab months in advance, it wasn’t available when the designated week rolled around. Turns out the computer lab had been closed indefinitely in preparation for it to be moved. “Those things happen. You just need to regroup and move on.” She anticipates using the CD program at a later date.

Even though calendars may be fluid, Jarman-Dunn said, “Planning out a master calendar is a very worthwhile activity.” Because updating and distributing master calendars can be so time-consuming, she instead sends out periodic memos reminding staff about counseling programs and advising them of any schedule changes.

**Slow and Steady Wins the Race**  
Even when counselors are busy designing a management system, administrators may not have totally bought into the ASCA National Model. So, school counselors should begin with what’s possible and generate momentum from there. Many school counselors take small but steady steps, adding one more counseling component each year. Jarman-Dunn says her principal now asks, “What are we adding to the counseling department this year?”

“If you can get your administrators or supervisors to let you try one little piece of the ASCA National Model, they will see the value of that one piece and what a good thing it is for their students,” Owen said. “You can’t do everything at once. Change takes time.”

And the time it takes to develop a sound management system that allows school counselors to address students’ academic, career and personal/social needs, well, that’s time well-spent.

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